



McDougall's Good Stories For Children



How Little Elsie Found Some Wonderful Earth Which Made Her Poor Old Grandfather Immensely Wealthy

OLD Mr. Herold was a florist, and he lived in a little house that was hardly more than a shed, at the end of a long greenhouse filled with many plants of the cheaper sort, for he was poor and had no rich customers who could pay big prices for choice flowers. He couldn't import plants that in far-away countries are mere weeds, growing wild but beautiful in the waste places, and sell them here as tropical exotics, as wealthy florists can do; but, instead, he raised ferns, elephant plants, palms and simple flowers which the poor people bought and set out in their gardens and porches in the summer; but in the winter he was often hard pressed for the means of living.

He seemed to be unfortunate, also. Many a time when he had obtained a rare plant and set it out in his greenhouse it withered and failed to prosper.



The Marvelous Spectacles Which a Kind Old Wizard Put Where a Tender-Hearted Little Girl Could Find Them

and Grandpa Herold prepared to wait until spring for developments. My, but wasn't he the most surprised florist on earth to find that everything had altered the very next morning! All the plants had shot up to the glass roof, and already were bearing flowers of a size and beauty that amazed him. Elsie was not a bit surprised, but calmly surveyed everything, and said:

"There! I said it must have some of those funny bugs in it!"

"Why, our fortune is made!" shouted Grandpa, hopping about in boyish glee and whirling his cane over his head so excitedly that he broke a twenty-cent pane of glass. "Those flowers will bring a dollar apiece! I'll cut a big bunch and take them up-town at once, and we'll have beefsteak for dinner to-night!"

When he came home with a pocketbook filled with money Elsie smiled, but when he opened a large package and showed her a wax doll most as big as

ALL THE HOUSES SEEMED TO OPEN THEIR MOUTHS

as it should with such care as he gave all his flowers.

His little granddaughter, Elsie, often wept over these failures; watered them with her tears, in fact, and bemoaned their loss as if they had been live pets, for she had been reared just like them in the long, sunny greenhouse, and had known no other home.

But Elsie, at any rate, had not been a failure, for she was a sturdy, bonnie plant, rosy and fresh as a dewy pansy in the morning, and she sang like a bird all day, consoling her old grandfather for the loss of many flowers; yet she often was saddened when she thought of his poverty and yearned to find a way to relieve it so that he would not have to toil so constantly and worry so ceaselessly. She blamed the soil in the greenhouse.

"It may be the soil," said Mr. Herold. "I cannot tell. Yet I have tested it often, and it seems good. It's full of bacteria."

"What's bacteria, and what good is it?" asked Elsie.

"Bacteria are very tiny things, so small that it needs a mighty good microscope to see them, and they look like little rods. They are alive, and they take nitrogen, which is a gas, from the air, and leave it in the earth as nitric acid for the plants to use as food. They are tremendously useful little things, and we have only known about them for a few years; in fact, we don't know much about them yet."

"Perhaps," mused Elsie, "we have got the wrong kind of back-back-what do you call 'em?"

"Bacteria. Well, there seems to be several kinds, and maybe we've managed, with my usual luck, to have got a weak sort," replied Grandpa Herold.

"Perhaps these are lazy!" said the girl, laughing.

"I will try to get a load of some other earth and inoculate the soil here."

"Why, that sounds like vaccinating it!" cried Elsie.

"It's exactly the same thing," said he. "A soil containing other or better bacteria will act just like yeast in dough and spread all through it a new life. But I hardly know where to get it, and I have no money," he added, sadly.

"At that moment a very old man in ragged clothes knocked at the glass door, peering in at them eagerly and shivering. Elsie ran and opened the door quickly, letting in a blast of cold air that made her shiver, also. The old man rubbed his hands as he looked about him, and in trembling tones asked the child for something to eat."

"We have nothing but bread," she replied; "I will give you some of that, but we are nearly as poor as we can be."

"You are warm in here, and that's a great deal!" said the old man, smiling at her. "I am thankful to get bread, let me tell you, for I have eaten nothing for nearly a week."

Elsie ran quickly for the bread, for she feared that an old man who had eaten nothing for nearly a week might tumble over at any moment. She had gone once without food for a whole day, and that was terrible, she thought, so what must it feel like to starve for seven days!

Now, when she brought it, the old man ate with some difficulty and not nearly as eagerly as a starved man would, she thought, but she laid that to his age; and she could not help wondering that he smiled so gaily at her all the time.

The fact was, that the old man was a great and wonderful wizard, who spent his time discovering and rewarding kind children, and he was so delighted at finding this rosy-cheeked, merry lass that he couldn't conceal his joy. When he had disposed of a large piece of bread with great difficulty, he said:

"Now I will journey on, but I think you for your charity and I hope you will be rewarded in some way."

"But," interrupted Grandpa Herold, "you can't

travel on a day like this! The thermometer is nearly down to zero, and the wind cuts like a pruning knife!"

"Stay here," added Elsie, "and be our guest until it gets warmer."

"I would gladly do so, even if I had to stay until spring, but I must go on my way!" responded the aged man, with a broad smile. "I have important business far away and must hasten!"

So he went away, and Grandpa laid himself down for his afternoon nap on an old moth-eaten sofa near the stove. Elsie went pottering about among the flowers and plants, for they were to her what chickens and lambs are to a little girl on a farm, or dolls and kittens to a child in a city house, as she had no toys or playthings of her own.

She turned up the soft earth, poking about in it with her chubby fingers and peering down into it to see if she could discover some of the mysterious bacteria that feed the plant-roots, and suddenly her hand touched something hard and cold. The next moment she dragged out a pair of ancient iron-bound spectacles, rusted and covered with earth. After examining them curiously she thought that perhaps Grandpa had lost them long ago, and she then cleaned them, polishing the iron until it shone, after which she placed them on her nose, where they wobbled duncously.

Looking across the street through the old spectacles, at the familiar red house opposite, she was startled to see that it was entirely changed, and instead of a rather ordinary, plain dwelling, it was a marvel of architecture, for it seemed to be alive!

It was frowning and glaring across at her out of its two upper windows as if angry, and then it seemed to open a great wide mouth, where its porch had been, as if about to swallow the long narrow greenhouse!

She shrank back in alarm, and her eyes fell on the tall fence beside the house, upon which was pasted dozens of brightly colored posters; and, strange to say, every figure in the pictures was alive and moving about on the fence!

"It must be these spectacles!" cried Elsie, after a moment of fright. "Things couldn't really act so, I know. Maybe it's those bad bacteria! They have certainly done something to the glass, but whatever it is I won't be scared, so there!"

Then she looked more calmly over at the strangely acting houses and posters, which continued to move and grimace at her, and then she saw that the statue of General Lafayette was tipping its way across the park straight toward her, snuffing most prodigiously and stopping now and then to bow politely to the frowning houses on each side! They all seemed about to swallow him if he came nearer, which alarmed the little girl; but when one of the figures on a poster sprang from the fence, linked arms with the General and stepped out with him in her direction, she began to be afraid of something happening to herself.

She was about to call her grandfather, when she suddenly spied a little green door in the greenhouse wall that she had never seen before. In fact, she was quite sure that it had not been there a moment before. It was only large enough to admit a child of her own size, and seemed as if it had been made on purpose to afford her an opportunity of escaping the General and the figure in red and black with him.

At any rate, Elsie didn't stop to ponder over it or wonder how it came there; she instantly darted to it, and laid her hand on the little glass knob at its side and it opened quite readily. She sprang into the welcome opening and promptly closed the little green door behind her.

Instead of finding herself in a closet, or else in the familiar vacant lot beside the greenhouse, either of which would have been natural, seeing that the little door was in the greenhouse wall, Elsie, to her vast amazement and utter bewilderment, instantly saw that she was in an entirely strange place, the like of which she had never dreamed of.

In the first place, instead of a sharp winter gale whistling about her ears, the softest of summer breezes were gently blowing, and instead of a vacant lot, disfigured by broken bricks, piles of ashes, old tin cans, rusty iron and bits of paper, she beheld a marvelous garden, where an array of wonderful flowers of unknown species and shapes confronted her wherever she turned, hedged in by tall and beautiful trees loaded with all manner of strange fruits!

She was so astounded that for an instant she hesitated and half turned to step back into the greenhouse, but the thought of the smirking General stopped her at once. At least, there was nothing here within sight that was alive and that could harm her, she reflected, and if she saw anything more threatening than a statue and a billboard picture she might retreat to the little green door to Grandpa at once.

So she advanced along a narrow path of the whitest pebbles, examining every strange flower most carefully in order to report each wonder to the old florist, for she knew that he'd be much interested in all that she saw; but as she walked she very soon perceived that every flower here, no matter how familiar it seemed at first glance, was widely different from anything ever seen in any greenhouse.

Here were some enormous peonies, flaming red and each bearing deep in its crimson bosom a tiny nest of birds; here were sunflowers, the centre of each a clock with hands pointing but noiselessly marking the hour; never a tick disturbed the silence of that wondrous garden; here were live cat-tails waving aloft, and pussy willows bearing rows of tiny sleeping kittens on every slender branch; dog-wood trees in bloom, upon which puppies of all kinds were clustered thickly, waiting to be shaken down by the next breeze; tiger lilies that had real tiger's heads, small but perfect, and quite threatening, but fast to their stems, for which Elsie was grateful.

There were the queerest combinations of land and

sea plants, startish growing on stalks, clams and oysters and crabs and lobsters on bushes like masses of seaweed, tall grasses with tips spreading out and colored exactly like peacock's feathers, bushes bearing myriads of tiny bells that softly tinkled as she brushed past, others with little black and blue ducks' heads opening their yellow beaks, but never quacking; beetles, quivering aloft in flashing, dazzling hues on the points of green spears; fountain plants, undreamed-of marvels, that spouted streams of gleaming water high in air; gigantic lilies, each holding the tiniest wax-like doll that really seemed alive, in its white hollow, and alphabet plants, the broad leaves of which were covered with letters.

I could take a whole page in describing the wonders that Elsie examined so carefully, having completely forgotten about the smirking General, but I have not the space to do so. Think of the oddest thing you can imagine, and, depend upon it, she saw just that!

She had roved again and again from end to end of the magic garden, and I think that there was not a plant growing there that she had not carefully inspected, when she suddenly thought that hours must have passed since she entered it and, reflecting that her Grandpa must be worrying about her absence, she hastily started for the little green door.

But on the way hither she remembered what he had said about getting some different soil for the greenhouse. What better soil than this could be found, thought Elsie, and without more ado she knelt down and began to dig up the rich, black earth and throw it into her apron. Her hands were grimy when she had gathered all she could carry, but that did not matter. It was all she could do to totter to the door with her burden, but she managed to open it without spilling more than a handful of the precious soil, and dropping from off her nose the ancient iron spectacles, which, strange to say, she had forgotten all about!

There stood Grandpa Herold, having just awakened from his nap, staring at her perspiring face and soiled hands, but when she dropped her load of black earth to the floor he asked:

"Why, where on earth did you get that?"

"I—I—in the vacant lot—that is, I s'pose it was that lot! Anyway, it's right outside through that little green door!" puffed the tired little girl, as she looked at her grimy hands and pointed to the door; but when she followed Grandpa's surprised glance and saw that the green door had utterly vanished, leaving nothing but the whitewashed wall, she, too, looked amazed. "Nor were the old iron-bound spectacles to be seen!" She had, very likely, dropped them outside the door when she opened it. Grandpa smiled kindly and merrily.

"It was there, Grandpa! I certainly came right through it this very minute!" Elsie declared. "Maybe it was the spectacles that made me see it, for now it's gone!"

"If you saw a door there it must have been something unusual that made you see it," responded Grandpa, laughing at her puzzled face. "I have been asleep, and dreamed that all the houses hereabouts were laughing at me, and so I suppose you've been asleep, too!"

"No, indeed! I have been very busy, and all that earth proves it!" protested Elsie, and then she told her strange tale. Grandpa tried hard to pooh-pooh it, but the proof was in that pile of black earth on the floor, and he couldn't pooh-pooh that.

"Well, we will try it, at any rate, and see whether it's magic soil or not," said he. "We will place it in different parts of the greenhouse and watch the result, but I fear it will be our usual luck."

So the earth was distributed between the plants

a real baby she wept tears of joy. She had no eyes for anything else, but Grandpa walked up and down the greenhouse marveling at the wonders that showed everywhere. Pretty soon he began to utter exclamations of prodigious astonishment, and then she went to him, to discover that things had happened that startled even the little girl who had visited the magic garden.

There in the corner where last night a pair of old rubber shoes had lain in the mysterious earth now was growing a tall rubber plant which bore on its stalk rubber shoes, crumblers, rubber bands, bags, gloves, balls, and, in fact, all sorts of rubber articles! She rubbed her eyes. They bulged out as she desecrated another wonder. A little tree bearing chewing gum stood in the shade of the big rose bush; and beyond still a greater marvel, for where an old discarded toothbrush had been thrown arose a bush bristling with gleaming ivory-handled brushes! Could anything be more astonishing! No wonder Grandpa Herold had been startled into outcries.

But a step revealed other surprises. Everywhere in the greenhouse where the magic soil happened to fall upon any sort of article it had sprouted. Here was a tree full of shining trowels, there one filled with little tin pails, over yonder a vine bearing silk purses exactly like the one that Elsie had carried until it wore out, but all brand new. Near the door Grandpa's old battered silk hat had sprouted a tall hat plant, loaded down with hats of the latest style, and there, where the aged, feeble beggar had laid down the bread he did not eat, rose a tree whose branches bore fresh loaves of Vienna bread, and quickly Elsie turned to see if there was a butter plant handy!

After everything had been inspected and their wonder turned into a consideration of what wealth would flow from these marvels, so that Elsie might now wear warm clothing and go to school, and Grandpa might now smoke good ten-cent cigars, they began to experiment further by planting all sorts of things in the black soil, and they went to bed filled with eager expectation.

On the morrow Elsie woke early, but Grandpa was ahead of her, speechless from amazement. Fire-crackers and torpedoes, old ones from last Fourth, had sprouted into trees; buttons had grown over-night into button-bearing shrubs with every imaginable kind of button on them. Shoes, coats, neckties, coffee pots, plates and lamps grew there! Handkerchiefs by the dozen, and aprons, collars and cuffs; a sausage tree stood beside a palm and an egg bush next to a fern. Everything they had planted had bloomed and fruited over night!

And the most amazing and eccentric things happened, for these magic trees grew the most unexpected marvel. For instance, an old horse-shoe produced a splendid pair of horses, dog collars sprouted into beautiful dogs; labels from cans, bottles or boxes were the seeds of plants producing the very things named on the labels, and, after a while, they found that they merely had to write the name of a thing on a piece of paper to have it growing splendidly next morning.

So, as Grandpa had predicted, they became very wealthy, but they are still as simple, unpretending and kindly as ever, and every boy and girl can share with them in the blessings that come from this magic earth, which even now they do not know was the reward of their kindness to that poor, shivering old beggar, who was the mighty magician, Jimgar Dnerram Sdell, of Alahabad, Persia.

But he knows how it all turned out as well as I, and he smiles whenever he thinks of Elsie's amazement, for he was peeping into the greenhouse all the time!

WALT McDUGALL.



PUSSY-WILLOWS WITH LIVING
PUSSIES ON THEM